

Reviews

Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era

Edited by Max Stackhouse

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 135 pp.

Review by *Brian Anderson*

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Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era inaugurates a new series of studies, edited by the noted Protestant scholar Max Stackhouse, dedicated to exploring Christian social thought against the backdrop of the failure of the socialist project and the globalization of economic life. In the post-Marxist era opening before us, we need to reexamine what role a properly Christian ethics can play in, and what an authentically Christian response might be toward, these dramatically transformed circumstances. To that end, this volume offers Stackhouse himself, along with three contributors—Peter Berger, Dennis McCann, and M. Douglas Meeks—making the first forays into the new territory. What they bring back is, as we would expect, a bit of a mixed bag, though Berger's essay on the relationship of vice and virtue to economic success raises important, and admittedly troubling, concerns.

For too long, Christian ethical reflection viewed the free market in economic life with deep suspicion, and often outright hostility. Even today, one could find more socialists or quasi-socialists in the seminaries of the United States than in the entirety of Eastern and Central Europe. But we should not just ignore such economically ignorant attachments, for they have had, in Latin America perhaps most powerfully, disastrous consequences. Even in this otherwise sensible volume, we have M. Douglas Meeks making several outlandish and empirically false statements about the failure of free trade and the withdrawal of the wealthy from common concern for the "household" of man. Meeks suggests a "democratization" of the economy, reducing it to a much lower scale of local "self-sufficient" markets, ignoring the inevitable concentration of political power and potential for massive abuse that would follow any reforms of this kind. And it is, in

fact, those areas of the world that have most enthusiastically embraced market economics that are experiencing the fastest growth, and the least pressure on their political systems. I can attest from my own experience in Poland—an exploding economy where authorities implemented difficult but crucial economic policies from the outset after 1989—that economic growth brings much good with it, including a very un-Slavic optimism one can literally see in the faces of young Poles.

But changes are afoot in Christian reflection. Most notable was the appearance of the remarkable encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in 1991 by Pope John Paul II, a work that went further, as Michael Novak, Rocco Buttiglione, and other Catholic social theorists have observed, toward endorsing free markets than any previous official church statement. What was most interesting about the encyclical was its phenomenological dimension, its willingness to understand the logic of the market from within, in order to better discern where we might best correct and limit it, as well as benefit from it.

And this working with, rather than against, the market becomes the true problem after the ruin of socialism. For the market, while recognizing the necessity and dignity of freedom in the economic sphere, must not tread where it does not belong. Not everything should go on the market—body parts, say, or addictive drugs, or children. In fact, were we to allow everything to be put up for grabs, to give everything a price, the market itself would cease to function properly and would, no doubt, find itself destroyed through political agency, an argument made most clearly in recent years by neoconservative theorists like Irving Kristol.

Yet capitalism, while requiring certain ascetic virtues at the outset, may be able to function—may even require—more hedonistic, or “Epicurean,” as Berger puts it, behavior over the long run as the need for consumption grows. But how Epicurean can we become before the benefits of the market start entwining with harms? What Pope John Paul II calls “consumerism”—a spiritual impoverishment in the midst of material plenty—is less an economic than a cultural problem, however, and we must tackle it in the cultural sphere. Reintroducing socialist economics will not solve our spiritual dilemmas. Can thicker forms of community coexist with modern capitalism? Can the corporation, as Dennis McCann hopes and sees realized in Asian economic life, be transformed into a form of such community? These questions, and many others with them, are internal to the functioning of market institutions, and it is on this landscape, rather than that of more fanciful alternatives to markets, that we must labor. *Christian Social Ethics in a Glo-*

bal Era for the most part succeeds in staying on solid ground, and begins to engage a debate that will not close any time soon.

Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm

Robert B. Ekelund, Robert F. Hébert, Robert D. Tollison, Gary M. Anderson, and Audrey B. Davidson
New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 224 pp.

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The Christian Church has long been suspected of harboring a bias against economic activity. One need look no further than the statements of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Evangelicals for Social Action, the National Council of Churches, or the writings of Jim Wallis and others to see that these suspicions are not without merit. In contrast to the dismal science and its self-interest paradigm that tends to support the case for a free, capitalist economy, Church leaders have often discouraged profit-seeking and all material pursuits in general. Some of the strongest advocates of socialism have come from its ranks, and these individuals have been quick to support government programs to limit the greed, selfishness, and exploitation that they see as the consequence of market economies.

In what may seem like revenge for all the years of abuse, economists Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, Anderson, and Davidson have turned the tables on the Church by showing that many of the early Church's activities can be examined and explained using economic tools. *Sacred Trust* maintains that the medieval Church functioned similarly to a modern multidivisional firm, obtaining monopoly profits by supplying the product of salvation, erecting barriers to entry, and manipulating demand through product innovation.

Some may view this approach as heretical, and the authors in need of penance, or even excommunication. But this work is no crusade against the Church, it is merely an effort to "push the private-interest paradigm as far as we can in an attempt to devise meaningful insights into Church behavior" (viii). In economics, of course, nothing is sacred because any social interaction can be thought of as a market process involving exchange, and thus can be examined and explained using economic theory. The authors